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# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING IN THE WORLD

FLETCHER HARPER SWIFT

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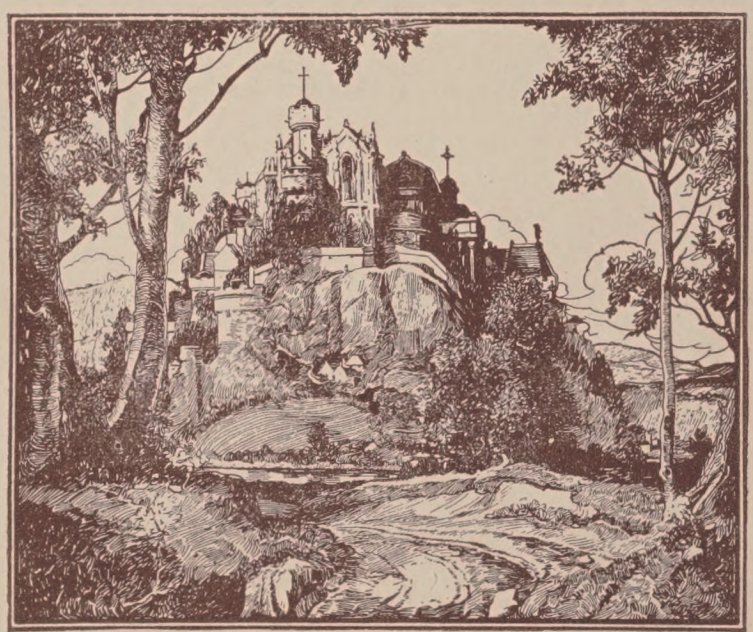
# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING IN THE WORLD

BY

FLETCHER HARPER SWIFT

*With Illustrations by*

GEORGE ALFRED WILLIAMS



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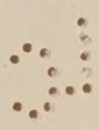

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# FOREWORD

I am most happy to stand at the threshold of this book and bid the reader enter. The house the author has built for us is not a large one, but, as the passerby may safely judge from its name and its exterior appearance, it is a beautiful one—and hospitable withal. Children and young people especially will feel at home in it, but if their elders should happen to enter, they will not feel any sense of strangeness, for there is much of the child and the youth in all of us, whatever our years.

The author, Dr. Fletcher Harper Swift, who is Professor of the History and Philosophy of Education in the University of Minnesota, is a master of the gift of teaching by parable. I can think of but two other recent literary creations which compare with this in conveying the lesson that both beauty and hap-

piness inhere in moral values. (One of these, "The Happy Prince," is the work of a modern English poet and dramatist, and the other, "The Blue Flower," came from the graceful pen of one of America's most delightful story writers.) Into such chambers of imagery we can not pass without approaching "that stage in which the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty burn as one fire, shine as one light." The door is open. Enter, gentle reader, "pilgrim of the Infinite!"

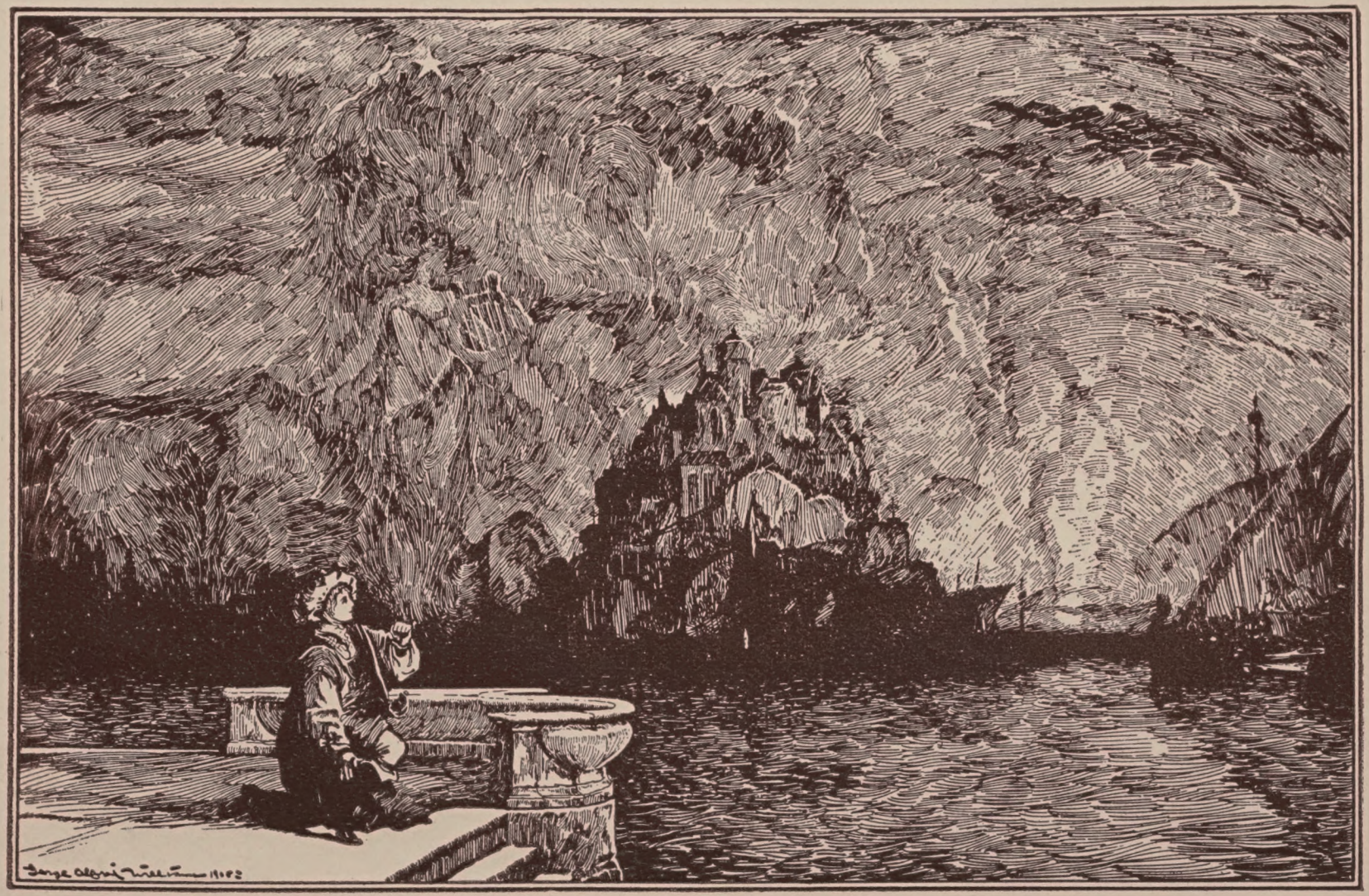
CHARLES CARROLL ALBERTSON.

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK.

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING IN THE WORLD

WHAT is the most beautiful thing in the world? What would the wisest man in the world say? Can there be anything more beautiful than the King's palace? These are some of the questions that the people who lived within the Kingdom of Rerum used to ask. No matter how much they wondered what the most beautiful thing in the world was, no one dared ask when inside the palace of King Timen, or when with any one who might tell the King that the question had been asked. Why they did not dare, every one in all the land of Rerum knew, and every one else can find out if they will open the old chronicles which contain the proclamations of King Timen.

When King Timen was a very young prince, he became famous far and wide for his love of whatever was beautiful. He would spend hours on the shore of the quiet lake in front of his father's palace, merely gazing at the water, the mountains, and the sky. At the sight of beautiful flowers he was seen to burst into tears for no other reason than because they were so beautiful. Indeed, there was nothing beautiful which he ever heard of that he did not at once wish to see and to possess. When he became king, this desire grew to such an extent that none of the things he had satisfied him; even the magnificent palace in which his father and grandfather had reigned, to his eyes became more and more dull and ugly, until he actually loathed it. So one day he called his counselors around him, and after telling them how very unhappy he was, he cried out: "My lords, I am going to build me a palace which shall be, and which all men everywhere shall declare to be, the most beautiful thing in the world. But I am a poor king. The kingdom



*Gazing at the water, the mountain, and the sky.*

of Rerum is small and my royal treasury is small. Therefore call together my armies; take what money we have, hire soldiers, conquer the kingdoms next to mine, bring me their gold and wealth in order that I may be able to build this palace."

The King's orders were obeyed. His soldiers were gathered together, and led out to subdue the surrounding peoples. Marvelous success attended them. In a few years King Timen was master of all the world of which any one knew in those days. His generals brought to him the gold and jewels of the conquered kings. The rulers and their subjects were either put to death or compelled to work as slaves in building the palace which was to be the most beautiful thing in the world, and which was already spoken of as "The Palace Beautiful."

The King was very proud of his palace, and he had reason to be. It would take many books to describe the wonderful groves that enclosed it and the beautiful views that could be seen from every window. Wherever one went

and wherever one looked, it seemed as if the last thing he beheld was more beautiful than anything he had seen before. Floors of yellow gold and white ivory, ceilings of purple amethyst and pearls, supported by marble columns between which swung chains of diamonds and opals; surely no one could dream of a more beautiful place.

When the Palace Beautiful was finished, the King held a great feast to celebrate its completion. He ordered all his subjects far and wide to come and pass before his throne and say, "O Noble King, I bless thee that thou hast built this marvelous palace, and hast permitted mine eyes to behold it. I have gazed upon many things in earth and heaven, O King, but surely this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world." This was a very long speech, and I do not suppose the littlest children were compelled to learn it; but this I do know, that every one who was old enough to learn it, was obliged to; and if any one refused to say it, he was to be put to death or

placed in a dungeon for the rest of his life.

There was only one man in the whole realm of whom King Timen was afraid. This was his chief magician. King Timen's chief magician was not like most magicians. He, of course, could do the mysterious things that king's magicians can always do; he could change sand into bread or money; he could pass through walls, and walk on the air, or disappear in a cloud of smoke. All this he could do and much beside, like other magicians, but he was different from other magicians, for he was a very good man, and would never use his power to injure others, not even when the King wished it. Nobody knew how old he was nor where he came from, but every one knew that he was the oldest and wisest man in the kingdom of Rerum.

It is not to be wondered at that the King should fear such a wise and powerful man, and that he should be especially anxious to know whether or not he would say that the Palace Beautiful was the most beautiful thing

in the world; for the magician, as every one said, knew everything in the world, and always spoke the truth.

If the people of Rerum thought the magician would be eager to see the palace, they were mistaken. As soon as the King began building it, the magician shut himself up in his tower with his books and his seven black owls. Here he remained, refusing to see any one. However, when the day of the feast arrived the King sent for him and commanded him to go into every room and then return to the throne-room and repeat the speech which every one else had repeated.

The magician came down from his tower in his long black robe. His white beard swept the golden palace floors as he walked, and his favorite black owl sat on his shoulder. He went into every room and looked at everything long and carefully. It seemed as if he did not merely look at the things he saw; he seemed to look through them. Yet it was noticed by some of those present that he gazed far more

intently into the faces of the King's subjects and slaves than he did upon the fountains sparkling in basins of onyx, or upon the carvings on the walls, or upon all the other marvelous and beautiful things.

When at last he had seen all, he told the soldiers to lead him to the King. As he entered the room he beheld the King wrapped in his ermine robe, seated on a throne of solid ruby, and wearing a crown whose splendor well nigh outshone the sun. On either side of the throne stood deep lines of soldiers. Soft fragrance filled the room. Not a sound could be heard except the low voice of one who was kneeling at the throne. There was a great procession passing before the throne, and each one as he reached it knelt, and repeated the words he had been taught to say: "O Noble King, I bless thee that thou hast built this marvelous palace, and hast permitted mine eyes to behold it. I have gazed upon many things in earth and heaven, O King, but surely this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world."

One by one they knelt and arose, and each one as he passed on brought the magician, who was the last in the procession, a step nearer the throne. When the magician was about to kneel a trumpet sounded. The room filled with people. Every one was anxious to see the strange old man who had shut himself up in the tower, and to hear him speak. No one, however, expected he would say anything different from what all the others had said, because every one, as well as the magician, knew just what to say. Besides there was nothing else any one could say, for surely nothing in the world could be more beautiful than the Palace Beautiful, and that was all any one was asked or expected to say.

Although every one knew just what the magician would say, yet the room was so silent when he knelt one could almost hear his heart beat. As he prostrated himself before the throne he caught his long white beard in his hands, and when he arose he looked to some of the people like a statue in a waterfall, for he

had wrapped his beard about his head and face in such a way that it covered him completely. This was the sign that he refused to speak. The King's face turned white, and flushed red with anger. His rage was so great that at first he could not speak. He rose from his throne trembling from head to foot. The people shrank toward the doors. The soldiers looked down at the floor, dreading to hear what the King would say.

At last King Timen spoke, and for once he seemed to forget that he was afraid of the magician and his power. In quick, cutting tones that sounded like the cracking of a whip he said: "Magician, for many years have I and my family cared for thee. For many years hast thou eaten our bread, drunk our wine, and lived in our palaces. Seven years ago thou didst leave our royal presence and didst shut thyself up in a tower of darkness. Seven years have I overlooked thine indifference to me. But to-day I have asked thee to declare thine admiration for a palace I have

been long in building. Many a battlefield is stained with the blood of generals who died that I and my people might build the Palace Beautiful. I have given wealth, years, and friends to build it; but thou who art richest in all things hast given nothing, and now, here in the presence of my people, thou refusest to utter one word of praise. Dost thou think that I will allow thee longer thus to defy me and the work of my hand? By my life and kingdom, I order thee to speak!"

Slowly the magician uncovered his face. Then gazing calmly at the furious King, he said, "O King, thy father I knew, and thy father's father I knew and his father I knew. I have, it is true, lived in their palaces, drunken their wine, and eaten at their board. Thou art different from them all. Some of them gloried in wealth; others gloried in war; thy great passion is for the beautiful. Thou hast built thyself a palace, O King. Thou hast named it the Palace Beautiful. Thou hast named it well, for it is a beautiful palace."

*"Since thou commandest me, O King."* (p. 17)

The magician ceased speaking and bowed low. The black owl, still perched on his shoulder, nodded its head very slowly, as if in approval.

After a pause the King said: "Magician, thou hast said my palace is beautiful. Is not this scant praise for such a monument of wonder as the Palace Beautiful? Thou art the only one of all my subjects who has hesitated to declare it to be the most beautiful thing in the world. Knowest thou of anything more beautiful?"

At these words an expression of deep trouble and sadness overspread the kind face of the old man. Leaning toward the King, he said, "Have mercy, my Lord. I crave thy pardon, but do not compel me to answer that question."

The countenance of the King grew more stern and angry than before: "Unless thou answerest it, thou shalt be driven from my presence forever."

There was a moment of painful silence, then the magician spoke again: "Since thou commandest me, O King, I must reply. There is

something in the world more beautiful than thy palace."

At these words the face of the King underwent a marvelous change. Astonishment, followed by pain, which ended in a wild, frenzied longing, spread over his features. To himself he murmured: "Something more beautiful than my palace! Ah, I knew there must be," and then to the magician he said: "Thou shalt bring it to me. It shall be mine."

"I cannot bring it to thee."

"That is to say, thou wilt not," cried the King. "Soldiers, seize the magician! Take from him his wand lest he use his magic and escape; place him in the dungeon; let him be beaten daily with two hundred stripes until he consents to procure for me what he thinks is the most beautiful thing in the world."

The soldiers feared to lay hold of the magician, but nevertheless approached him. As they drew near, the old man waved his wand. There was a strange sound like the buzzing of

many bees; a mist filled the hall; the magician vanished.

When the mist cleared away, the people looked at the King. He was pale and displeasure still showed in his countenance, but he spoke in kind and courteous tones as he invited them to join in the feast which had long been waiting. The people gladly forgot the unpleasant disturbance, and feasted and danced until break of day. Then they all went to their homes to talk over what they had seen in the Palace Beautiful, and the strange way the magician had acted, and how suddenly he had vanished.

The day following the feast, and for many days after, King Timen wandered through his palace, gazing long and sorrowfully at everything he saw. He went from room to room, looking now at some wonderful jewel, now at some beautiful statue, here at a lovely vase, or there at a picture. He seemed to love most of all to stand at one of

the windows and look out upon a lake which lay between two dark mountains. Yet a deeper and deeper sadness seemed to come over him, for no matter how beautiful the object he looked upon, he would sigh deeply to himself and say, "There is something else in this world more beautiful, but I shall never possess it."

One day he called his four most trustworthy generals to him. He commanded the first to go north, the second south, the third east, and the fourth west, and to search far and wide throughout the earth until they should find something more beautiful than the Palace Beautiful.

After three years the generals returned and were summoned before the King. They came into his presence empty-handed. Bowing low, they said: "O King, we have searched east and west, north and south. We have been all over the earth, but we have found nothing as beautiful as thy palace. Be content, O King,

for this palace of thine is the most beautiful thing in the world."

The King listened to his generals, but their words failed to cheer him. Indeed, they made him more melancholy. He had had some hope, until they had spoken, now his last hope lay shattered, a broken goblet, incapable of holding longer even a drop of consolation. All alone he sat and wept, wept with longing to behold the most beautiful thing in the world. At midnight he cried out in despair: "O magician, where art thou? If thou wouldst only return and tell me what the most beautiful thing in the world is, I would give all I have, yea, even my life, to possess it."

No sooner had King Timen said these words than he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw the magician standing beside him. In a low voice the magician said: "I have seen thy tears, O King, and heard thy words."

"Magician, pity me," cried the King, "I

am a King, but I am the most unhappy man in all the world. Bring me the most beautiful thing in the world and restore peace to my soul and sleep to mine eyes."

"The most beautiful thing in the world," responded the magician, "is something I cannot bring to thee. It can be seen and felt, but cannot be handled. Nevertheless whoever is brave enough and desires it enough to give up everything else for it can possess it. If thou wishest to behold it, I can take thee where it may be seen."

"Is it far?" asked the King.

"It is near," answered the magician, "but thou must journey far before thou canst behold it."

"Wherever it is," cried King Timen, "and no matter how long the journey, take me to see it, for I shall never be happy again till I behold it and strive to possess it."

The magician seated himself and the King on his long black cloak, and in a few moments the two were out of the palace, floating over

the tops of the forests, swifter than the wind.

After several hours the King fell asleep. When he awoke he found himself in the most beautiful garden he had ever seen. As far as the eye could see there seemed to be nothing but acres and acres of most lovely flowers, bending under the impulse of a soft breeze: White roses among tall purple lilies; red roses climbing up and forming towers of fragrance, swaying lines and fragrant billows of blue, gold, and scarlet. Most wonderful of all to King Timen, none of the roses had thorns and, as they swayed in the breeze, they gave forth soft, sweet music like a thousand fairy harps played at twilight. Ere long the King heard the voices of children singing, and in a moment the garden thronged with them. They began picking the flowers, and soon each one had his arms full. They were so happy and their faces were so beautiful, that as King Timen looked at them he could not tell which were the more beautiful, the children or the flowers. Turning to the magician, he said: "I under-

stand now why thou couldst not say my palace was the most beautiful thing in the world. This garden is even more beautiful than my palace. This must be the most beautiful thing in the world."

The magician made no reply, but led the King into an arbor and told him to be silent and watch. Forthwith the scene before them underwent a dark and fearful change. Out from behind a bank of flowers stole a hideous man with a whip in his hand. Behind him followed ten black slaves. Each carried a long chain and a whip made of rose-thorns. They caught the children and began binding them with the rose-thorn chains, beating them all the while with whips. Cries of pain and terror filled the air. King Timen struggled to go to the children, but found he could move neither hand nor foot. Thereupon he closed his eyes till the cries ceased. When he opened them the children were gone. Nothing was to be seen save a garden full of flowers, rarer and

more lovely than those blossoming there before.

"Where are the children?" asked the King.

The magician pointed to the flowers.

"What do you mean?"

"They are flowers now. The garden belongs to the monster. He entices the children hither, and changes them into flowers."

"What does he do with the flowers?"

"Sells them to the rich and powerful."

"Take me out of this fearful place," pleaded the King, and a moment later he found himself with the magician floating again high over the earth. King Timen was too sad to speak. He remained silent and thoughtful. It was the magician who spoke first: "That is an old, old garden."

"Whose garden is it?" asked the King.

"It is the Garden of Toil and Might."

"And whose children are those?"

"They are the foundlings of fortune."

King Timen saw that they were coming close

to the earth now, and were swiftly approaching a castle. Soon they were inside a great dining-hall. The lord of the palace and his guests sat feasting at the tables. Never in all his life had King Timen beheld such a beautiful palace, such a dining-hall, such dishes, such furniture, such a noble-looking gathering of people. The feast came to an end. The lord and his guests went out. The tables still groaned with food no one had been able to eat, and looked as if laden for a second repast. The doors opened and there crept in as many people as had gone out, but those who came in now were clothed in rags and their bones almost stuck through their skin. Many were so weak with hunger they could scarcely get to the tables. They sat down and began to eat, gulping their food like starved dogs. Outside a storm was raging and a cold wind shook the windows, but all within betokened joy and abundance.

"What a beautiful palace this is!" cried the King. "The palace itself is far more beauti-

ful than the Palace Beautiful. Moreover, every one here, rich and poor, is served like a King."

A long cruel laugh rang through the hall, and the lord of the palace came rushing in with servants and soldiers. They overturned the tables and with drawn swords drove the starving multitude from the palace, hurling through the windows those too weak to flee.

King Timen closed his eyes and shuddered. "Magician, take me from this place!" he cried, "I cannot endure it a moment longer. What I thought was the most beautiful thing in the world has again turned out to be most dreadful."

The magician looked at the King.

"Dost thou, indeed, desire to depart at once? Hast thou forgotten how beautiful the women are and how magnificent their gowns and their jewels?"

"Nothing here can seem beautiful to me after what I have witnessed," returned King Timen.

"Then we will go," said the magician, whereupon they left the palace, and were once more sailing through the air, sitting on the magic cloak.

"What is the name of that palace?" asked the King.

"That," replied the magician, "is the Palace of Pride and Fear."

"Magician," said the King, "do not show me any more gardens or palaces. Show me now some beautiful landscape, the most beautiful one in the world, and I will be content."

The magician pointed down at the earth, and the King gave a cry of joy. Had any one ever dreamed of such beauty? Shoulder to shoulder across the western sky stretched a range of purple mountains. Far away to the east lay a golden sea dimpling in the light of the rising sun. Along the shore extended a city with harbor and ships. Through a narrow opening in the mountain wall leapt a silver river, bearing a message from three sister lakes

that lay half hidden, caressing and cooling the storm-beaten faces of the hills. Nothing was lacking to make the scene perfect. The King, whose heart was sick with the dreadful sights he had beheld in garden and palace, viewed with relief the peaceful scene before him.

"Ah, magician," at length he cried, "not the palace nor royal garden which any king has made, but this land which I look upon, is the most beautiful thing in the world. Take me back to my kingdom now; I will gather my armies and come and win this country for my own."

The magician made no answer, but simply pointed, first east, then west. The King looked and saw two kings approaching rapidly with thousands of men. They came over the mountains, cutting their way where no path opened. King Timen had never seen such fine soldiers, and his heart beat fast with joy as he beheld them, young, strong, and brave, every one.

"Are these kings friends or foes?" he asked.

"They are bitterest enemies," replied the magician.

"Are they going to fight?"

"Yes."

"Will many be killed?"

"All but the two kings."

"What! Are they willing to butcher thousands of husbands and fathers to gain possession of a bit of country?"

"Why didst thou ask me to take thee back to thy armies?" inquired the magician.

The King was silent. The battle began. It continued for five days and nights. At the end of this time not a man in either army was alive except the two kings, who fought until finally they fainted from loss of blood. Everywhere were piles of the bodies of the dead. Every rock and log was red with blood. The lake and all the streams that flowed out of it were as red as wine.

King Timen had pleaded with the magician again and again to take him away. "Once I loved to watch a battle," he said, "but how can

I bear to behold this country steeped in blood and its lovely flowers crushed with the heaps of the dead? This land was the very thing my heart had sought, the most beautiful thing in the world, but alas, see what it has become!"

But all his entreaties were in vain. Not until the battle was over would the magician take him away. As they were about to depart King Timen asked, "Ought we not to give assistance to the kings?"

"They do not need us. They will soon recover and will live for hundreds of years, though the armies they lead are daily cut to pieces."

"What are their names?"

"Their names," answered the magician, with a strange sad smile, "are Mine and Thine."

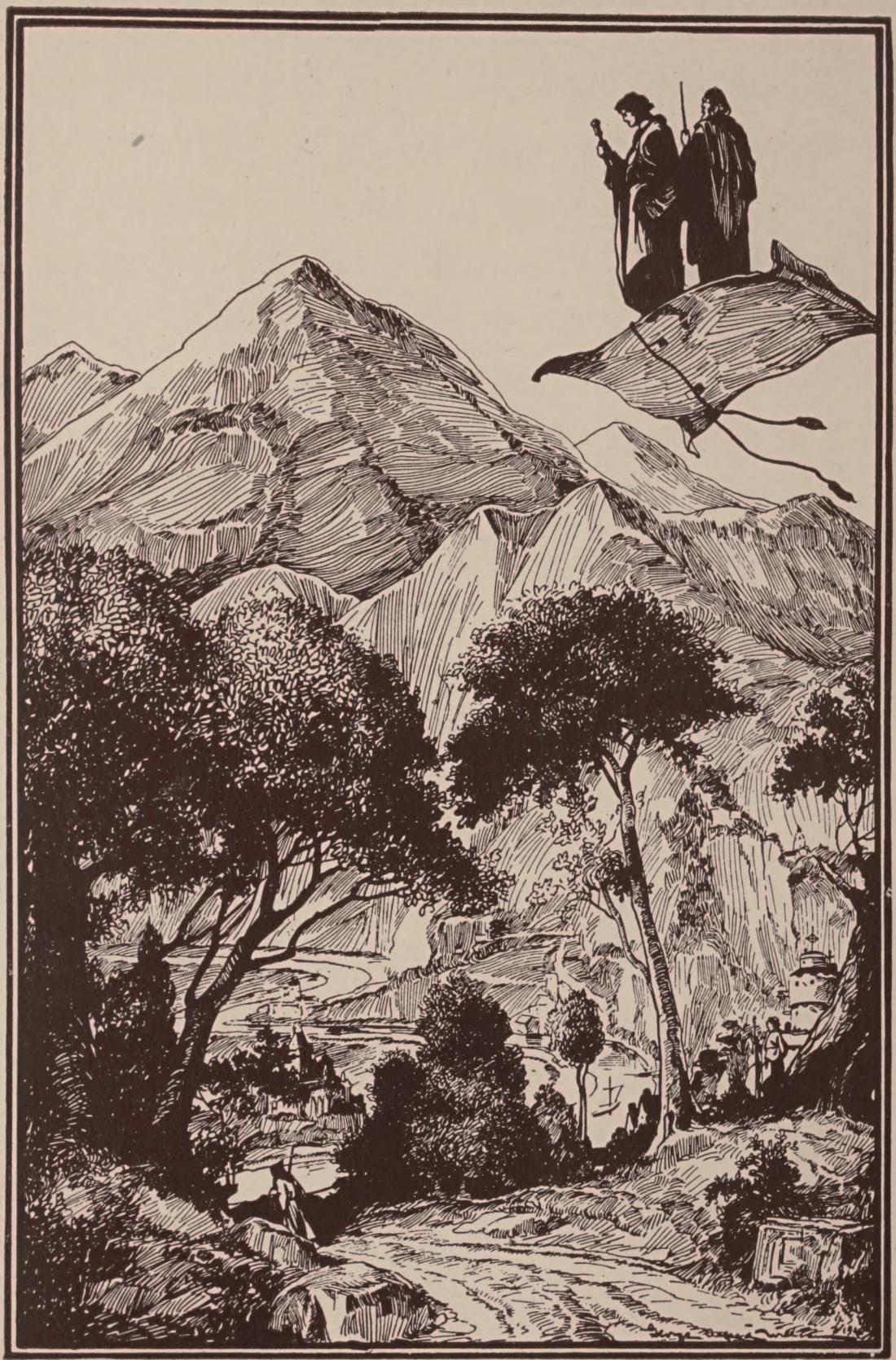
"O magician," cried the King, "this world would be a beautiful place if there were no people in it. God made it beautiful, but man makes the most beautiful places hideous. The most beautiful thing in the world would be this

earth without man. Tell me, is there no way to get this?"

"Thou hast spoken wisely, O King. It is indeed man who makes all the lovely places hideous. I have shown thee the world as it is, and the most marvelous places in it as they are. What thou longest to see is the world as it was. Wave this wand three times and thou shalt behold the earth as God first made it, without man.

The King waved the wand three times. A fine dust filled the air, blown along by the wind. The magician pointed to it and said, "There are now no people in the world."

The King felt relieved at once. The sorrow which had hung over him like a cloud vanished; he could not keep from singing. He gazed down at the earth. How calm and beautiful it was! Everywhere he looked he beheld nothing but beauty and happiness—green waterfalls, wide rivers, snowcapped mountains, yellow fields of golden grain, brilliant plains of palms and red tropical flowers. Birds sang



*"Show me some beautiful landscape."* (p.28)

everywhere. The animals in the forest wandered at will. Man had vanished from the earth, fear and oppression were gone.

"Flowers, birds, sunshine," cried King Timen. "Nothing could be more beautiful than this. This is the lost paradise!"

On and on they travelled. At last they had seen everything and were on a second journey around the earth. The King was sitting on the magic cloak, which in their travel floated, spread out like a cloud, when all at once he discovered that the magician was gone. He called and called, but no answer came. At first he was frightened. Then he began to be very lonely. At last he realized that he was the only human being left in all the world. A week passed, then a second, and then a third. At the end of this time King Timen was so lonely that he tried to make friends with a grasshopper, which somehow or other had got on to the cloak. From very loneliness he would talk to the little fellow, just as if he were a real person, and the grasshopper would

jump about and spread his wings in a very friendly fashion.

It was toward the close of a long dreary day that the King said to the grasshopper: "My little friend, unless the magician comes back before night, I shall surely jump into the sea. I thought this was a dreadful world when I saw how the most beautiful places in it were spoiled by the cruel and selfish people who live in them. I thought all would be settled if we could only get rid of the people, and so I waved the wand."

Here the grasshopper raised his black, shiny wings three times, exactly as if he understood.

King Timen continued: "But this earth without people is far more horrible than it was before. I can endure it no longer. I wonder, if I should wave the wand again, if it would bring the people back?"

The grasshopper looked very knowing, and spread out his wings, as if he approved the idea.

"It will do no harm to try," said the King,

whereupon he waved the wand. Immediately a fine dust filled the air and enveloped the earth. In it King Timen saw the forms of men, women, and children taking shape and floating down to the earth. In a few moments the world was full of people. Through the gray twilight bright candles beamed out of windows which had been dark for so many, many nights. Once more King Timen saw mothers in the doorways with their babes in their arms. Once more he heard the church bells which had been silent so long, when there was no one to ring them. Yet sweeter to his ears than the sound of bells came the voices of children singing songs and saying their evening prayers. Overcome with joy at the sight he could do nothing but say, "O what a beautiful world! O what a beautiful world!" Yet even while he was saying these words he saw a man beating a horse in the street, and some boys torturing a dog; and, as the cloak continued to descend, he heard so many cruel words and saw so many unkind and unhappy faces that he could but

think again that the most lovely places in the world are spoiled by the people who live in them. Indeed, he began to wonder whether he would not have acted more wisely if he had not brought the people back, for he could see the armies of Mine and Thine marching down from the mountains, and, nearer, the children going into the Garden of Toil and Might, and far away rose the towers of the Palace of Pride and Fear. Next he wondered what had become of the magician, and said aloud:

"I have been on a long journey to find the most beautiful thing in the world. The magician said I should know it when I saw it, but so far, alas, I have seen nothing that I want!"

How it happened King Timen did not know, but before he had finished these words he found himself once more in his own palace. He looked around, hardly knowing whether or not he was glad to be back. The palace was filled with people, yet no one seemed to notice him. While pondering over this, he chanced to pass in front of a great mirror. He paused in as-

tonishment. Could that be his own reflection he beheld in the glass! The night he had left the palace his hair had been streaked with gray; now it was bright gold. During his absence he seemed to have grown twenty years younger. His cheeks were ruddy with youth; his face was the face of a boy. This was not all; he was dressed like those who were waiting to serve the tables. Before he had recovered from his amazement he saw the servants hastening towards the dining hall. King Timen knew he must go, yet stood motionless. An officer who had been watching him walked up to him and asked how long he expected to keep the lords and ladies waiting.

King Timen had never suffered as much in all his life as he did in the next few hours. Of course, he did not know what to do or how to do it. He dropped costly dishes and spilled wine on the guests. No one had any sympathy for him. He was called blockhead and cuffed. Finally, in some way he offended a great noble, and was dragged to the prison, where he was

beaten until he could not rise from the floor, and then tossed, bleeding and moaning, into a dark and loathsome cell. Here he lay, too weak and sick to think of anything. It seemed as if his whole body were one great sore. After a time he fainted, or became half unconscious from weakness and misery. How long he lay thus he did not know. He knew nothing until at length he heard some one speaking beside him. He had never heard such a beautiful voice. At first he did not open his eyes for fear he might be dreaming, and that if he awoke, the voice would cease. A moment later the King felt a hand bathing his head with cool water and washing his wounds.

"Alas, poor youth, thine eyes are badly hurt," said the voice. "I must bandage them, or thou wilt go blind."

The King said nothing, but he wondered who it could be that cared whether or not he went blind. Perhaps it was because he was weak; perhaps it was because he was lonely; but, whatever the reason, tears stole out of King

Timen's eyes and fell on the floor of the dungeon cell.

"I must not leave thee here. The poisonous gases which escape from these walls will kill thee," said the voice. "This cell is one King Timen built in which to confine any one he wished to put to death, but did not dare to kill outright. Besides, there is no bed here, not even a bundle of straw."

The voice ceased. Thereupon King Timen felt two strong arms placed firmly but tenderly about him and he was carried for some distance and then laid on a bed. Here he remained, his new friend caring for him day after day. Day after day the same gentle hands brought him food and dressed his wounds. King Timen learned to love those ministering hands. Sometimes he would raise them to his lips and kiss them.

One day he asked: "When can I take this bandage from mine eyes?"

"After a few days," answered his friend. "Art thou growing weary of the dark?"

"Not so weary of the dark as weary with waiting to see thy face."

"Why art thou anxious to see my face?"

"Because I know it will be the most beautiful face I have ever seen."

"Thou wilt be disappointed if thou expectest my face to be beautiful. Soon after they brought me here I fell victim to a dreadful disease. My face and both my hands are covered with hideous scars."

"If thy face does not prove to be beautiful, I know it will be the kindest I have ever seen, and that is better."

As the day waned King Timen grew so impatient to see his friend that he decided to risk removing the bandage from his eyes. He waited until he heard the jailer's step upon the dungeon stairs. At this sound, his friend always left him to receive the evening meal. The King took off the bandage in time to see the door open and the jailer enter carrying a tray. His friend spoke kindly to the jailer, who smiled in return, placed the viands on the table,

*"What is the most beautiful thing in the world?"* (p. 42)

and departed. The King's friend began dividing the food into two portions; one he reserved for the King, the other he passed through the bars into the passage way. Then he slipped through himself and proceeded from cell to cell giving the inmates wine, fruit, and other food. This done he returned to King Timen explaining he had been taking food to the other prisoners.

"Do not all have the same food?" asked the King.

"No; most of them receive only black bread and water."

"Thou receivest other things?"

"Yes, I am a royal prisoner."

"And thou sharest with the others what they bring thee?"

King Timen did not ask any more questions. He did not know just what to say. When night came he could not sleep. He rose and stole to the window and looked out upon the sea. The moon was shining; a ray of light made its way into the cell and fell on the face

of King Timen's friend, who was asleep on the stone floor. The King looked first at the moonlight, and then at the face on which it shone.

"What is the most beautiful thing in the world?" It was the voice of the magician. The King was startled by the sound, but the magician was so calm and quiet that King Timen's fears vanished, yet he could not speak.

Again the magician asked, "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?"

King Timen turned and pointed to his friend, who lay stretched in sleep on the cold hard floor.

"What dost thou mean?" asked the magician.

"I mean," said the King, "that a loving life, a life which is full of kind deeds and thoughts, the life which finds its greatest joy in giving up to others what is its own, the life which, amid its own sorrow and suffering, thinks of the suffering and sorrow of other lives—that is the most beautiful thing in the world. Magician,

once thou didst show me the most beautiful garden, the most magnificent palace, the most lovely landscape mine eyes had ever beheld. The beauty of each of these was destroyed by the unkindness and selfishness which filled it and ruled it. Then I asked thee, and thou didst show me, the earth without man, and though at first it seemed perfect, after a time I learned that the earth without man would be like a harp without strings. Here in this prison I have seen and felt and learned to know the most beautiful thing in the world."

"Dost thou understand now why I said I could not procure it for thee, but that any man who was brave enough and desired it enough to give up everything else for it, might possess it?"

"Yes," answered King Timen, "I understand."

It was a strange scene: the great dark cell, dimly lit by the moonlight; the sleeper on the floor; the magician with his black owl on his shoulder, and his long white beard sweeping to

his feet. The King and the magician bent over the sleeper. The King's hands were clasped as if in prayer. Thus they stood long and silent gazing into the sleeper's face, which seemed to grow more and more beautiful each moment. A cloud covered the moon. Perhaps it was only fancy, but it seemed as if a light, like the light from a pure and precious stone, stole out from the sleeper's face and lit up the darkness. King Timen knelt beside the sleeper and lifted him gently from the floor to the bed, and then lay down himself on the cold hard stones, falling asleep full of the peace and the joy which came to him because he had found, and now had begun to possess, the most beautiful thing in the world.

The next morning when the King awoke, he was lying, not on the stone floor of the dungeon, but at the foot of his throne in the Palace Beautiful. His kingly robes were creased and damp, as if he had travelled in them a long distance. His hair was matted. Perhaps he had tangled it with his hands while he slept, per-

haps it had been many days since it was combed. No one could say.

King Timen arose, ascended his throne, called his court about him, and proceeded to relate his adventures. Probably some who listened wondered whether his journey was not all a dream. I see no reason for thinking it was. Certainly the old chronicles of Rerum Land do not record it as such. If there were any who doubted it in King Timen's day, they had only to be told how strangely the King disappeared one night, and how he was found a month later in the early morning asleep at the foot of his throne.

There was something else, however, which, every one admitted, proved beyond a doubt that King Timen's adventures were not merely a dream. He laid aside his magnificent robes, and donned a simple suit of black. He no longer spent his time planning how to get things for himself. The hours he had once been accustomed to spend in feasting, or dreaming, he now passed in going from one

part of his realm to another. No life was too humble to interest him; no cottage too lowly for him to enter. In this way he learned to know the needs of his people. He was so gentle in his manner as he travelled from village to village, that many who met him failed to recognize in him the proud King Timen of long ago. Often as he rode along he would dismount from his horse to place on it some worn traveller or weary child, and as he walked alongside he would tell them the story of the most beautiful thing in the world. Every one who heard his story loved it, and when they reached home would talk about the strange man, and relate the story he had told them. Year by year the story spread, and more and more people began to understand it and believe it. Indeed it won such great renown that when King Timen was old, and his hair grown white, he became known throughout the world as the King Beautiful and Rerum Land as the Land Beautiful, and no one seemed to remember they had ever had any other names.

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